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SUBJECT: CONGRESSWOMAN MCCOLLUM DISCUSSES REFUGEES AND  
REGIONAL ISSUES WITH PRESIDENT ASAD

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.5 b and d

11. (C) Summary: In a 25-minute discussion with Congresswoman McCollum (D-MN) on November 28, President Asad criticized the lack of preparation for the Annapolis Conference but said the initiative represented an important first step. He stressed the need for determined U.S. engagement in the coming months, and asserted Syria and the U.S. shared an interest in seeing the peace initiative succeed. Regarding Iraq and refugee issues, Asad called on the international community to address not just the humanitarian "symptoms" of the Iraqi refugee crisis, but also the root political causes within Iraq itself. McCollum expressed appreciation for Syria's cooperation in addressing Iraqi refugee issues and pledged to work in Congress and internationally to support Syria programs to assist refugees. She also welcomed Syria's decision to attend the Annapolis peace conference and urged Syria to continue to participate. End Summary

12. (C) In a brief meeting organized by Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Moustafa, President Asad received Congresswoman Betty McCollum on November 28 to assess Iraqi refugee issues. Foreign Minister Walid Mouallem and a notetaker attended on the Syrian side. Per the Congresswoman's request, Charge and Pol/Econ Chief (notetaker) joined.

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Iraqi Refugees: Treat Cause, Not Just Symptoms  
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13. (C) Asad opened the meeting by asserting that the political component of the Iraqi refugee issue should not be separated from the humanitarian challenge. Without addressing the core political causes of the refugee flight from Iraq, focusing on the humanitarian symptoms alone would not yield a positive outcome. Syria had felt the effects of the refugee influx more than most, and certainly more than the U.S., according to Asad. Though the Syrian government remained at odds with many aspects of U.S. policy, they nonetheless shared some common interests and it was good to talk.

14. (C) The highest priority should be to solve the political chaos within Iraq, said Asad. Without a positive political horizon to hope for, Iraqis outside the country would not return and be a constructive force in the rebuilding of the country's future. This had been the lesson

of the Palestinian diaspora: Palestinians who had fled their homes had become even more radical than the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza because they lacked hope of a political settlement. Iraqis who had escaped from their country had lost their social status and now were vulnerable targets for extremists who could exploit their weakness. Without political progress in Iraq, Iraqis outside the country would never be able to return and support the political establishment. Syria therefore viewed the Iraqi refugee issue as going beyond the need to provide food, health care, clothing, and shelter.

15. (C) Asad opined that education posed a major challenge. Syrian schools were now overflowing with the addition of some 70,000 Iraqi children, whose parents paid nothing. There were an estimated 200,000-to-300,000 more Iraqi school-age children in Syria who were not attending classes, and they posed an even greater challenge. International assistance was vital to address this critical issue, argued Asad, because these children represented Iraq's future. Some were working illegally, while others were not in school because of their parents' fears about what might happen to them. The alarming point was that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children were missing years of their education when their country would depend on their skills to rebuild the country.

16. (C) Syria had received many international pledges to support the estimated 1.5 million Iraqis now in the country, but it had not yet seen much in the way of concrete assistance, Asad lamented. Because of fuel and food subsidies, the inflow of Iraqis had easily cost the Syrian government over one billion USD, and that figure did not include the cost of education or health care services the

DAMASCUS 00001140 002 OF 003

government was providing to Iraqis.

17. (C) Congresswoman McCollum agreed with Asad's assessment on the need for political progress in Iraq and praised Syria's willingness to provide shelter, food, and material support to Iraqi and other refugees. McCollum said that the U.S. saw the Iraqi refugee problem as a major international humanitarian challenge. Americans had been very supportive of U.S. assistance contributions through the UNHCR. McCollum mentioned her discussions with Special Advisor for Iraqi Refugee Issues, Ambassador James Foley, about his meetings in Damascus, which represented an important sign of the USG's ongoing commitment to this issue. McCollum said she would be reviewing USG requests for refugee relief in her capacity as a member of the House Appropriations Committee. In addition, McCollum said she would use her position as a member of an international parliamentary organization to look at possible international mechanisms that could support Syria's water and sewage infrastructure that was bearing a greater burden because of the presence of Iraqi refugees in Syria.

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Annapolis: Only the First Step  
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18. (C) Asad was cautiously upbeat about the Annapolis conference, saying that he was awaiting a readout from the Syrian delegation led by Vice Minister Mekdad. Though it had always called for peace, Syria had been suspicious about the Annapolis Conference because of a negative regional context and the lack of thorough preparations in advance of the conference. Unlike the 1991 Madrid conference, which had been preceded by eight months of intensive shuttle diplomacy by former Secretary Baker and led to five years of focused negotiations on all tracks, the Annapolis Conference appeared to be hastily assembled. This was risky, asserted Asad, because failure to follow up the U.S. initiative with meaningful and committed diplomacy would result in more extremism and violence in the region.

19. (C) Though some were saying it was too late to undertake

the Annapolis initiative, Syria would continue to work for peace. Syria, continued Asad, had insisted on the inclusion of the Syria track on the Annapolis agenda because no Middle East peace initiative could proceed without addressing all aspects of Israel's occupation of Arab land. Syria could not allow such a precedent to be set. The U.S. response to Syrian demands had come a day before the participants needed to be in Washington, leaving the Syrian government to scramble to make arrangements for its delegation's travel. Asad said he had thought about pre-positioning the Vice Foreign Minister in London to ensure his ability to reach Washington in time. But in the end, the Syrian delegation was able to attend.

¶10. (C) Syria had participated and was now committed to supporting the initiative, Asad said. Syria recognized that the Palestinian track was the immediate priority. However, Syria would not neglect the Syria-Israeli track. Asad supported the idea of a Moscow Conference in Spring 2008 but said there remained a great deal of work to be done by the U.S. and others.

¶11. (C) Comparing the Palestinian and Syrian tracks, Asad said ending Israel's occupation of the Golan was relatively simple compared to the Palestinian issue. There was no real ideological backdrop in the case of the occupation of the Golan. Agreement on its return to Syria would require agreed arrangements on security, water, and normalization. The international community and the parties themselves recognized the principle of land for peace in this case.

¶12. (C) The Palestinian issue, by comparison, faced deep divisions within the Palestinian and international communities. The Palestinian Authority did not represent all Palestinian views, and the Israeli government appeared too weak to lead the Israeli people to an acceptable agreement. Therefore, the U.S. would have to assert a strong will to achieve a successful outcome. The post-Annapolis efforts needed to go beyond rhetoric and establish concrete goals and timelines for the talks.

DAMASCUS 00001140 003 OF 003

¶13. (C) Success for the sake of the U.S. and for the good of the region was now vital, asserted Asad. Syria participated in the Annapolis conference despite its reservations about whether it represented a sincere U.S. desire to promote real and lasting comprehensive peace in the region. Now the U.S. needed to demonstrate its commitment to this goal by working hard. Syria too shared an interest in a positive outcome and would work toward this goal as well.

¶14. (C) Representative McCollum said Syria's attendance at the Annapolis Conference was important. In her personal view, the U.S. administration had neglected the Palestinian issue and let many opportunities pass. But the Annapolis initiative was an important, if late step that all sides should seek to build upon. The next President, regardless of party, will have a new opportunity to pursue partnerships in the region, and President Bush's initiative had helped to create this opportunity. He could have chosen not to have taken this diplomatic risk, said McCollum. Being in Syria allowed her to hear and appreciate Syria's view and contribute to a wider dialogue in the future. As parents, McCollum said U.S. and Syrian leaders should view these issues through the lens of what would most benefit their children's generation.

¶15. (C) Asad agreed, adding that any steps taken now would make it easier for the next President, Democrat or Republican. Pursuing comprehensive peace in the Middle East was a matter of U.S. national interests. Asad said he personally did not have a lot of hope, but he continued to hope for the best. Syria would continue to cooperate on refugee issues and remained supportive of regional peace efforts.

¶16. (C) Congresswoman McCollum was able to clear this cable before departing post.

CORBIN